

**A Comparative Analysis of Racism (Racial Black Bodies) in Old and Contemporary
Hollywood Movies**

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Introduction

This essay titled “A Comparative Analysis of Racism (Racial Black Bodies) in Old and Contemporary Hollywood Movies” intends to closely examine the portrayals of racism in Hollywood cinema. There has been a contentious debate regarding the representation of blacks in Hollywood films from old periods of classical Hollywood to date. This debate is serious because when the audience sees blacks in stereotyped racism-oriented roles, it is highly likely that they might perceive blacks’ same position and status in real lives. This means Hollywood representation of blacks is strong enough to influence the audience, social norms and ethnic perceptions in the US society. This essay perceives that Hollywood racism is not a new reality because Hollywood’s century-old history shows that Hollywood had been frequently representing African Americans in stereotyped roles which include but are not limited to negative personalities, thieves, low-class domestic workers, powerless, slaves, inferior and uneducated characters. By and large, blacks are shown under the dominant whites. These racist representations are not only examined on the Big Screen, but Hollywood remained racist even off-camera. One of the most notable examples relates to the century-old Oscar Awards (1929) as highlighted by Zijlstra (2017). Blacks were seldom nominated in Oscars for years, and even if they secure nominations, they were treated inferior during the awards both on-camera and off-camera. The world witnessed that it took more than ten years for blacks to secure nominal nominations in the Oscar Awards. Given these facts, this essay intends to investigate and explore the historical significance of Hollywood racism by comparatively analysing blacks in old and contemporary Hollywood movies.

Essay Body

Black Hollywood

Hollywood is one of the most supreme and biggest motion picture production industries around the globe. According to Bordwell et al. (1985), Hollywood has a much stronger cultural presence, which shows that it has to stay, it cannot even fade, and that is why it is flourishing day by day. Hollywood holds an evident supremacy all around the globe due to its unique powerhouse

culture comprised of its management structures and production processes. However, there has been a very little viable place for blacks/African Americans in Hollywood. It has been observed that most of the movies which were being produced in the early 20th century that were meant to show black African Americans did not cast blacks for these roles (Jumoke, 2016). Strangely, white actors were cast in those African American roles who were presented as blacks by applying cosmetics. Similarly, regarding black writers in Hollywood, Bielby & Bielby (2002) highlight the era of 1920s-1940s shows that movies were being produced specifically for the black audience by independent filmmakers, however, black writers were not given opportunities to write other than the low budget, race-oriented movies.

Given these facts, the unique concept of “Black Hollywood” emerged in which the key focus was on making race-based films. Goodykontz (2015) argues that despite blacks being drawn into the mainstream Hollywood productions, they were mostly given roles as lowlifes, criminals or domestic workers at large. The key leading roles were only available to the white actors, thereby restricting the blacks/African Americans to the very dimension of “Black Hollywood” (Garrett, 2017). It can be said that Hollywood had two different categories, the mainstream category was the Hollywood of whites, whereas the “Black Hollywood” was somewhat a low category centred on producing films for a different world of the black audience. This kind of different attitude to blacks was also observed in the 1929 Oscar awards as highlighted by Zijlstra (2017). For long eleven years, no African American actor was nominated for Oscars until “Hattie McDaniel” was chosen for her role in the film *Gone with the Wind* 1939 (Zijlstra, 2017). Notably, “Hattie McDaniel” was nominated as a supporting actress (not a mainstream one), that too after eleven years long await. Additionally, she was not directly nominated by the jury as in the case of other white actors, but she had to manually request the producer to pass her name. In off-camera circumstances, Oscars remained an exclusive club for whites as well. For example, “Hattie McDaniel” was not allowed to sit on the table (during the Oscar Awards) where white actors were sitting (Zijlstra, 2017). Additionally, the male actor “Sidney Poitier” was nominated for his role in the film *Lilies of the Field* in 1963, which means after 24 long years.

Racial stereotypes in classic Hollywood movies

Bernadi (2001) admits that Hollywood had been dominated by race and racism factors in old times. The most notable terms in Hollywood were associated with racial stereotypes namely “dark other” and “white other”. Here people with white complexion were considered cultural,

familiar and comfortable, while blacks were characterised as dangerous, devious and culturally low. “Blackface” term was used as a racist cosmetology and the silent cinema was also immersed in racial stereotypes and slurs since the start of the 20th century (Musser, 1991). Chapple (2018) writes:

[in films]...When people of colour were finally able to represent themselves in films, they were unable to escape the trap of the blackface persona that had been created for them. Therefore, many black entertainers adopted the looks, actions, responses, dialogue, and stereotypical characterizations that began in blackface (p. 6).

This cinematic racial representation can also be critically observed in movies produced before World Wars. For example, movies like *Chinese Laundry Scene* (1894), *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1903) and *A gypsy Duel* (1904) all represent Hollywood racism. The stereotyped role of Uncle Tom’s character depicted a black slave whose life is dependent on complying with orders. Because blacks were taken as slaves in the United States, therefore, this character represented a visual depiction of the slavery system. The black woman was generally given the character of *mammy* who had no attributes but nursing whites’ children. By the mid-1920s post World War I, a continuity of visual racism was observed in Hollywood in which whites had an upper edge over blacks. This continuity of racial stereotypes marginalised blacks as low, inferior, damaging, insulting and negative compared to whites.

Bogle (2001) highlights that prior to Hollywood movie *The Jazz Singer* in 1927, white actors used to play the role of Blackface in silent movies. *The Jazz Singer* turned into a pioneer film for its use of blackface intertwined into Hollywood’s racism. Thereafter, when Hollywood started recruiting real black actors, a whole new vocabulary of racism turned in with specific words such as toms, mammy, signifying that Hollywood cinema has now become a main intersection of racism.

The Motion Picture Production Code (1930)

When looking through Hollywood after World War II, a major change was observed especially the enactment of the “Motion Picture Production Code” for movies content which was written in 1929 and officially accepted in 1930 (Leff, 2000). Apparently, it seemed like this legislature might bring a change in Hollywood’s racial stance, however, racism uninterruptedly continued despite producing many anti-racism subject movies. For instance, the famous classic animated movie *Song of the South* (1946) was produced in Hollywood with its demonstration of

African Americans as offensive and racist. Luca (2021) argues that the movie *Song of the South* (1946) tended to encourage black slavery and racist Black stereotypes. This movie displayed specifically black people racial minorities with a complete mixture of humiliation and ridiculing of black characters. Because the black style of singing was specifically demonstrated in this movie alongside racism-based humiliation and ridicule for blacks, its distribution in all the US was initially restricted. Nevertheless, its distribution was later permitted globally, thereby making it the highest-grossing movie during those days. This shows the inability of the “Motion Picture Production Code” that set the racial guidelines for movie production. Another movie *Gone with the Wind* (1939) also shows black women’s slavery, inferiority and low-level position through the character played by *Scarlett O’Hara* with a core subject of reconstruction after the civil war (Singh, 2016). In fact, in the movie *Gone with the Wind* (1939), there was no explicit discussion of the inferior position of black women in the film nor did the idea of slavery was exclusively shown, but the film indirectly exhibits both of them as necessary components of the culture in America.

Glory (1989), Dangerous Minds (1995), Amistad (1997)

Over time, the audience started seeing black actors in the lead roles, therefore, one can assume that the supremacy and dominancy of the whites were somewhat cracked. However, despite this change, similar stereotyped roles were given to the black actors which include but were not limited to harmful, dangerous, inferior, low cast, domestic, servants, slaves, labours, maids, waiters, janitors, one-dimensional roles. Regev (2021) argues that all of such types of characters served nothing but to amplify and confirm adverse cultural stereotypes. Moving forward, it was largely criticized that racist values have been intertwined in Hollywood, which could be intentionally or unintentionally, however, there were no two opinions that intrinsically, Hollywood industry was racist. This kind of historical racism in the Hollywood film industry can be observed in the movie *Glory* (1989). The plot of *Glory* represents warriors of the 54th regiment during the Civil War in the United States in the northern regions in which the Irish drill sergeant represented racial stereotypes during his instructions to the warriors on “how to march”. Stoddard & Marcus (2006) highlight that African-American soldiers were negatively called by the sergeant as “little monkey children”, which signifies racial stereotyping. Therefore, one cannot ignore this kind of racism in the movie, and it is quite natural for the audience to make a perception that blacks/African-Americans were inferior compared to whites. Another opinion can also be

strengthened that even if the army fights with the enemy for a mutual cause, black soldiers and white soldiers cannot be graded as equal human beings.

Racism was also exhibited in another movie *Dangerous Minds* (1995) where a white teacher served in marine struggles to educate her coloured rebellious students by using unorthodox methods (Adams, 2015). The black students in the film show the attitude of never believing in whites; they had a perception that white can never do good for them, which is also a racism-based attitude presented in the movie (Ulya, 2015). Giroux (1996) argues that *Dangerous Minds* (1995) attempts to show the archetype of rationality in the shape of whiteness. Therefore, the film offers the main frame of reference as whiteness that is necessarily required to redefine or refresh the negative perceptions of black students within the contested space of the urban public schools. The major fault lines were shown as black students and the pedagogical strength was depicted and referred to as whiteness.

Amistad (1997) was produced by “Debbie Allen” and directed by “Steven Spielberg” with a plot of an uprising on a slave ship (Sheridan, 2006). In this movie, the same continuity of racism can be examined since it was shown that freedom cannot be gained by African-Americans if they do not rely on whites. Additionally, the film’s plot shows the slave trade as a racist institution or practice that had strong roots over a period of three centuries. While showing these racist systems through the film, 53 Africans were shown as victims of slavery which were being shipped from West Africa to Cuba by the Portuguese, representing blacks as slaves. The perpetrators who were shipping blacks happened to be Spanish whites. Although the film says nothing about American slavery, it still shows that blacks were the victims of slavery, whereas whites were the owners. This composition of characters itself advocates the racist ideology where whites are superior and blacks are inferior.

Racism in contemporary Hollywood movies

Generally, it is assumed that entertainment is the sole reason for which audiences watch movies. Nevertheless, Glenn & Cunningham (2009) highlight that audiences are influenced by the movie characters in terms of their associations with each other and images. Resultantly, movies influence the audience how they perceive themselves and other people around them. It can be said that people make a difference between bad and good, morally sound and evil, ugly and beautiful, negative and positive by watching media images. This means when Hollywood movies present

black characters in specific roles, then they are not only characters but rather a solid social existence based on factual ideologies representing stereotypes and racism. These Hollywood movies have turned into a source, a dimension of racial propaganda unlike only representing social anxiety in peoples' lives (Mauldin, 2014). It is argued by Lipsitz (1995) that racism did not propagate through slavery and segregation alone, but rather racism was born out of what media (including Hollywood movies) is presenting before us. Lipsitz (1995) writes:

while cultural practices including wild west shows, minstrel shows, racist images in advertising, and Hollywood films institutionalized racism by uniting ethnically diverse European American audiences into an imagined community-one called into being through inscribed appeals to the solidarity of white supremacy (p. 370)

Given this fact, the unrestrained nature of racism between African American blacks and whites have been represented as a social reality in Hollywood movies. When audience often watch those types of stereotype characters in films, they start perceiving them as a social reality in American society. When they would watch the character of black *mammy* on the big screen, it would equate to erasing the perception in their minds that slavery is a bad thing or it has anything wrong to do with the African American coloured people (Jackson, 2013). Therefore, the audiences are highly likely to feel that if blacks are given low-life or inferior domestic occupations, then it is fine to distribute these occupations on cultural grounds.

When critically analysing racism in contemporary Hollywood movies, this essay observes that the same stereotype characters (which were given to black actors in the old or classic Hollywood movies) are also majorly given to them in the contemporary movies. For example, mammy's role in the old Hollywood movie *Gone with the Wind* (1939) can also be observed in the contemporary movie *The Help* (2011). This means even seven decades gap is unable to erase African Americans' racial representation on the big screen. It is very seldom in Hollywood that blacks' lives are depicted with positivity, and often African American characters are shown with a bad, negative or inferior image. The female blacks are frequently shown with stereotyped characters as if they are always angry, aggressive and sassy individuals. Therefore, the audience can assume that black women are always full of anger and attitude in their real lives. Similarly, this aspect of racism is frequently shown by presenting African American men as "no-good black man", lazy and jobless (Morgan & Bennett, 2006).

Fences (2016)

The contemporary movies exhibit the same racism-based stereotype characters of blacks. For example, when critically analysing the movie “Fences” (2016), the leading character played by a famous black actor *Denzel Washington* i.e., *Troy Maxon* shows similar decades-old racism. The character of Troy is shown as a garbage man who has nothing but an extremely inferior status in the society of whites. *Troy* is shown as a 53 years old garbage man, a low-level worker whose prime job for the sanitation department is based on lifting garbage into trucks (“SparkNotes: Fences: Character List”, 2021). The movie shows the old days of the 1950s when *Troy* used to be a former baseball player, as well as a prisoner who had never been in a good mood and positivity with his family members i.e., his two sons and wife. This is because his wife and sons wanted to crack the centuries-old racism and they did not want to remain marginalised in society. These movie characters show the same Hollywood history in which black actors were often given the stereotyped character roles including criminal, negative personality, low-level citizen or domestic worker (Goodykontz, 2015). By contrast, *Troy Maxon* had a strong belief that African Americans have been entangled in an incessant struggle for survival, thus his family members should think and act in a practical way that how to support themselves in the best possible manner (Headley, 2014). This was the key reason that *Troy* wanted to enforce his strict ideology on his wife and sons. When his son *Cory* requested him to sign the football career, then *Troy* adamantly rejected the request and advised his son to forget the dream of excelling in football career in contemporary American society. Despite that *Troy* used to sarcastically protest racism in the US society almost throughout the movie, *Troy* did not want that his family try to crack the shackles of racism. This attitude might bring the idea into the audience’s minds that black people just speak about racism but they force their families to accept and remain happy with this racism-based phenomenon.

A similar attitude of *Troy* can be observed when his wife *Rose* protested *Troy* to sign *Cory*’s football paper. She protested that times have been changed compared to the past, therefore, *Troy* must realise and accept this change. The response from *Troy* shows that *Rose* is also a low-level, inferior woman both outside in society, as well as inside the house. The response of *Troy* while explaining his inferior life in society can be seen in the following dialogues as described by Elkins (2013; p. 111):

I do the best I can do. I come in here every Friday. I carry a sack of and a bucket of lard. You all line up at the door with your hands out. I give you the lint from my pockets. I give

you my sweat and my blood. I ain't got no tears. I done spent them. We go upstairs in that room at night . . . and I fall down on you and try to blast a hole into forever. I get up Monday morning . . . find my lunch on the table. I go out. Make my way. Find my strength to carry me through to the next Friday.

If the contemporary movie "Fences" (2016) is compared with the old Hollywood movie *Song of the South* (1946), racism-based similarities can be observed. For example, *Song of the South* (1946) shows African American animated characters as slaves yet they were not dissatisfied with the situation. The character of "Uncle Remus" was shown as if he is satisfied with working in a plantation where the owners of the plantation were leading whites. Similarly, the character of *Troy Maxon* and his life shows identical attributes, the same humiliation, ridicule and acceptance of low-level life, especially when *Troy* refuses the request of his son *Cory* to sign a football paper. This is because he had a strong belief that his son's racial identity will drag him back to the inferior, low-level life.

Other contemporary movies depict the same African American racism. For instance, the comedy-drama movie titled *I Can do Bad All by Myself* (2009) shows a racism-based stereotyped main character who does nothing but club singing and getting drunk (Jumoke, 2016). Another film named *The Joyful Noise* (2012) exhibits black women as aggressive, over-possessive, adamant, clueless and irritating individuals. The dominant concept of Hollywood for being extremely white can be observed in other movies such as *The Birth of a Nation* (2016) directed by Nate Parker and *Moonlight* (2016) directed by Barry Jenkins.

When critically analysing black characters played by women in Hollywood movies, it is observed that they were mostly presented as subdued and sexually objectified. Yancy (2015) writes: "black women and women of color not only suffer from sexual objectification, but the ways in which they are objectified is linked to how they are racially depicted, some as "exotic" and others as "hypersexual." (p. 4). Another movie named *12 years a slave* (2013) shows the debut character of "Patsey" played by actress "Lupita Nyong'O". She has been depicted as a female slave who is blessed by her beauty, due to which, her master was lenient on her for picking more cotton exceeding her quota. Again, she was not endowed with this favour due to her capability, but because of her beauty. From racism's perspective, her role can be ascribed to blacks in Hollywood who are incapable and inferior.

The Help (2011)

The Help (2011) shows two leading black female characters namely *Aibileen* (played by Viola Davis) and *Minny* (played by Octavia Spencer). *The Help* (2011) story also revolves around a similar theme of women employed as slaves in dominant white families. The theme shows these characters as black maids employed by a white female family during the civil rights movement. White superiority and black inferiority has been revealed throughout the movie. The movie unfolds the 1962 times in which two maids unite with one white lady *Skeeter*, attempting to write a book on the matters of black maids' experiences (Taylor, 2011). The movie shows the low-level inferior lifestyles of black maids such as how hard they labour for dominant white families and how less salary they were given every month. Racism was also exhibited when these maids were shown with no permission for using washrooms in the houses of whites. The same inferiority was exhibited in a scene where *Aibileen's* boss *Elizabeth* (played by Ahna O Reilly) had a women-gathering for lunch at her residence. In that scene, a guest *Hilly* reasoned, as highlighted in The Help Movie Quotes (2021):

...They [black maids] carry different diseases than we do. That's why I've drafted The Home Health Sanitation Initiative, a disease preventative bill that requires every white home to have a separate bathroom for the colored help. It's been endorsed by the White Citizen's Council.

This scene denies all sayings that favour human equality in every sense of the word. Notably, *Hilly* was not only a general guest invited at Elizabeth's house, but she was also the boss of *Minny* (the second maid). *Hilly* was extremely stubborn about blacks, especially regarding blacks' usage of toilets that she even put dots on her toilet tissues, thereby marking the tissues to ensure her black maid *Minny* get caught if she use them.

Conclusion

This essay acknowledges that globally speaking, the Hollywood film industry has a special significance for being the highest motion picture production industry, yet it is entangled with racism. Whether it comes to examining off-camera Oscar Awards in the past century, or the early films such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903), *A gypsy Duel* (1904), *The Jazz Singer* (1927), *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *Song of the South* (1946), *Glory* (1989), *Dangerous Minds* (1995), *Amistad* (1997), etc., racism for blacks had been depicted in the majority of movies. It was evident throughout the classic and post-classic Hollywood movies that inferiority was always associated

with blackness. By contrast, the supremacy of whites over blacks remained the key theme in those movies. The essay perceives if Hollywood movies had been continuously representing and portraying blacks as inferior and low-life individuals, then the audience will make a solid perception that blacks also belong to low-life individuals in real lives in American society. By closely examining the contemporary movies including *The Help* (2011) and *Fences* (2016), it came to light that the same century-old racist characters were given to African Americans in the contemporary movies as well. Whites are still seen as supreme while blacks are shown as inferior or subdued to whites. For example, the character of *Troy* in *Fences* (2016) exhibits a low-level garbage collector man who used to press his family to accept the racist reality prevailing in American society. Similarly, black females were given the characters of maids to white owners in the contemporary movie “*The Help*” (2011); by and large, these black women were shown as classless and powerless individuals who were even not allowed to use toilets in whites’ homes despite that they were raising the kids of whites for an extremely low salary. The workplace-based racial inequality in *Fences* (2016) where the distribution of jobs was strictly based on race, and the same racial inequality in “*The Help*” (2011), this essay concludes that the world of blacks is shown in Hollywood as limited and restricted by the powerful racial system. This racial depiction in Hollywood movies might pave the way for nourishing a racially ostracized American society which can be harmful to a just and peaceful environment at large. Given these facts, it is expected that Hollywood should pay attention to this racism issue so that Hollywood movies do not show class-based groups in which the supremacy of one group might create tension for the peaceful living of the other group.

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